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September 24, 2013

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Addressing Mental Health and Drug Addiction Key to Reducing Prison Population, Senate pro Tempore Darrell Steinberg Tells Board

California Senate President pro Tempore Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) on Tuesday told the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors that Los Angeles can help lead the way in addressing the underlying issues affecting crime with the implementation of Senate Bill 105, which proposes a long term prison overcrowding solution by establishing significant funding to mental health and drug rehabilitation services to reduce inmate recidivism.

SB 105 provides performance-based grants to counties that have established programs which successfully reduce the number of felony probationers returning to prison. However, before the bill is implemented, a federal three judge panel, must first determine if it will allow the state extra time to comply with a court mandate to reduce the state's prison population. If an extension is granted, officials will use it to expand rehabilitation programs aimed at keeping offenders from returning to prison after they have served their time.

"I am hopeful that the federal three-judge panel is going to grant an extension so that the state is not spending money exclusively or primarily on leasing jail space, especially out of state," said Steinberg. "With those hundreds of millions of dollars saved over time in addition to the mental health services, L.A. County will have the resources at its disposal to lead the way in California to show that we can be smart on crime. Mental health is the issue of our time."

Steinberg said the judges were interested in looking for a "credible path" to address the issue. If judges reject the request, the state will relocate thousands of inmates to privately owned prisons and other detention facilities. To comply with the court's mandate and relieve overcrowding, the state released thousands of inmates to county

jails. Currently, Los Angeles County is struggling with overcrowding in its jails and with the release of nonviolent inmates.

Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors Chairman Mark Ridley-Thomas, who has long maintained that both the state and the county need to maintain a greater focus on mental health services, agreed.

“Providing necessary services to people right when they leave prison or preferably before they leave, is simply being smart on crime,” said Chairman Ridley-Thomas.

Steinberg noted that the state has tried many strategies to combat crime, including three strikes laws, increasing penalties and building more prisons, which have not been effective in reducing the 65-70 percent statewide recidivism rate.

SB 105, which was signed by the governor on September 12, marked a historic shift in the direction of California’s policies with respect to imprisonment and the criminal justice system in addressing the root problems causing thousands of offenders who finish their sentences, are soon re-offend after their release.

Los Angeles County Probation Chief Jerry Powers, Department of Mental Health Director Marvin Southard and District Attorney Jackie Lacey also testified. Lacey noted that prosecutors would like to expand a program to create more mental health courts for low level offenders.

“We’re really challenged to meet the needs that are occurring,” said Lacey. “But this is an issue I’ve made a priority. Dealing with the mentally ill is a much more humane and effective way to go.”

The bill allocates \$360 million for increased mental health services. Los Angeles County could be eligible for \$40 million for crisis residential treatment in addition to its share of triage and mobile crisis personnel.

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